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Mr Andy Peirson
Principal
Armthorpe Academy
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Dear Mr Peirson

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Armthorpe Academy

Following my visit to your school on 19 January 2018, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the monitoring inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave me and for the time you made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the school since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and has taken place because the school has received two successive judgements of requires improvement at its previous section 5 inspections.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection in order for the school to become good.

The school should take further action to:

- ensure that the revised plans to address the areas for improvement from the previous inspection report are relevant, clear and specific
- make sure that teachers use the information provided to them by the special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) to plan and deliver lessons that meet the additional needs of pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities
- improve pupils' attendance by decreasing persistent absenteeism, particularly for pupils who are disadvantaged and those who have SEN and/or disabilities.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, other senior leaders and governors. I also met with the multi-academy trust's chief executive officer and a trust adviser to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. The school action plans and other improvement documents were evaluated. You and I carried out joint observations in lessons and I checked the school's safeguarding records and systems to ensure staff are safe to work with children. Meetings were held with the acting SENCo and a group of key stage 3 and 4 pupils.

Context

Since the previous inspection in October 2016, there has been a significant turnover in staff. Every senior leader is new to their role. Due to the closure of the post-16 provision, and a need to address the financial deficit, a large number of staff have left. There is a new leader of science and some middle leadership roles have been removed as part of a staffing restructure. In the past, the school has found it difficult to recruit governors. However, there are now eight members of the governing body and four have been appointed in the last two terms. An acting SENCo has recently been appointed.

Main findings

Leaders and the trustees implemented a range of strategies to address the weaknesses identified in leadership; outcomes; and teaching, learning and assessment at the last inspection. Leaders amended the school development plan and introduced a number of 'quick fixes' and some longer-term changes to the way in which they and other staff work.

Leaders acknowledge that pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities were let down in the past. However, despite turbulence in the leadership of this department, leaders acted swiftly to appoint an acting SENCo. The trust and local authority provided specialist advice and guidance on a monthly basis to ensure that leaders comply with the specific requirements of the special educational needs code of practice. Appropriate special educational needs support strategies are now circulated. As a result, teachers have the information they require to be able to plan to meet the needs of pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities. However, leaders acknowledge that they are unsure if this happens regularly. The acting SENCo has evaluated special educational needs provision in detail and is beginning to address the remaining weaknesses. Pupils' literacy is supported via appropriate reading strategies and leaders regularly analyse the deployment of teaching assistants so that they better support pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities. Leaders are aware that further improvements are needed to monitor and guide teachers' use of special educational needs information in their planning and delivery of lessons.

Teaching is improving. Leaders continue to address the quality of verbal and written feedback pupils receive from teachers to ensure that it is given in accordance with the school's policies. Following intensive research and feedback from staff, pupils and parents, leaders made the decision to trial a new way to assess pupils' written work. Evidence from work scrutiny and discussions with pupils indicates that teachers' feedback is more precise and pupils are much clearer about their strengths and areas to improve. Systems to monitor the quality of teaching in school are robust. Subject leaders liaise well with senior leaders to share findings from observations in lessons and there is a developing culture of collaboration between teachers within the classroom. The pupils spoken to during the inspection acknowledge that the quality of teaching has improved significantly since 2016. One pupil spoke for others when saying, 'The teachers know us well and we wake up in the morning wanting to come to school.'

Leaders' work to improve the progress of pupils has been a key priority. Over time, the progress of the most able pupils has not been good enough. Leaders created a further action plan focused entirely on improving the progress of the most able pupils. Teachers have received training to ensure that they understand how to plan and deliver lessons that challenge the most able pupils and contribute to improving rates of progress. Teachers' performance management targets are linked to the progress of the most able pupils. Subject leaders review schemes of work to ensure that appropriate levels of stretch and challenge are included for pupils in both key stages. Examples of additional strategies to raise expectations and improve the progress of this key group include 'The Brilliant Club' and debating club. Pupils are supported by teachers and experts from outside of the school to help them to write a dissertation or to improve their public speaking. The impact of leaders' actions was seen in a Year 8 mathematics class where the most able pupils were challenged appropriately to multiply fractions. Pupils were confident in their responses to their teacher's questioning. Their answers included a wide range of subject-specific terminology.

An external review of governance is yet to take place. Following the previous inspection, a number of governors left the governing body. Leaders and the trustees decided that a review was not appropriate until replacements had been found who had the required skills and knowledge to make a positive contribution to school improvement. The task of appointing new governors who fulfil these criteria was much harder than leaders initially thought. There are now eight governors, including the principal and chief executive of the trust. Despite their attempts, leaders have been unable to appoint a staff governor. A review of governing body minutes highlighted limited challenge to leaders and many meetings focused on updates or procedural matters rather than the areas for improvement identified at the time of the last inspection. The trustees were proactive in filling the vacuum left by absent governors. Directors redirected trust resources to support school leaders. New members of the governing body have received appropriate training from the trust and the local authority. Governors say they are becoming much more confident and

feel that they are able to ask the 'difficult' questions. The long-awaited review of governance is expected to take place before Easter. Leaders and governors are aware of the urgent need to implement any recommendations and to increase the level of accountability when challenging leaders.

The amended school development plan includes relevant strategies to address the areas for improvement highlighted in the previous inspection. However, the actions are not clear or specific enough to allow leaders and other staff to understand exactly what is expected of them. For example, the plan does not clearly identify the persons responsible for leading or taking actions, nor does it include specific timescales for completion. Leaders do review progress towards completion during meetings but this is on an ad-hoc basis and, on occasions, the leader monitoring the action is the person assigned to complete it.

The attendance of pupils is an emerging concern. Overall attendance rates remain below the national average and the proportion of pupils who are persistently absent from school is increasing, including for disadvantaged pupils and those who have SEN and/or disabilities. The senior leader with responsibility for attendance left in the autumn term. This role has been distributed among other senior leaders. An education welfare officer has been assigned to the school to provide attendance support to vulnerable pupils and families.

External support

In addition to the support provided by the trust, you have looked further afield for specialist help and guidance. You have welcomed the partnership with the local teaching school and have evaluated correctly that the subject network meetings and specialist leadership support in French and science have had a positive impact. Leaders and teachers in the mathematics department have benefited from recent work with another multi-academy trust to develop their understanding of 'mathematics mastery'. The local authority provided regular support in the SEN department and their evaluations contributed to the creation of the whole-school development plan.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the chair of the board of trustees and the chief executive officer of the multi-academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Doncaster. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Lee Elliott
Her Majesty's Inspector